

WHY WOULD GOD DROWN CHILDREN?

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By James A. Haught

The ghastly Indian Ocean tsunami on the day after Christmas - one of the worst natural disasters in the history of humanity - may have an unexpected side-effect: Intelligent people increasingly may be forced to abandon the notion that an all-loving, all-powerful, fatherly, kindly, creator god controls the universe.

If a deity caused the Indian Ocean horror, or callously did nothing to save the shrieking victims, he's a monster. The tragedy proves conclusively that an all-merciful, omnipotent, compassionate creator cannot exist.

Surely, after this horror, more perceptive people will see that it's bizarre to go to church and worship a god who presided over the drowning of perhaps 80,000 children and twice as many adults. Surely, they'll begin to realize that the vast rigmarole of god-worshiping rests on a fairy tale unsuited for enlightened moderns.

This same theological quandary has applied to many calamities again and again throughout the centuries. In philosophy, it's called "the problem of evil," and it covers a wide range of cruelties. How could a loving creator devise hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, twisters and other people-killers? How could he concoct leukemia for children, breast cancer for women, Alzheimer's for the old, and the like? How could he fashion cheetahs to disembowel fawns, and sharks to rip seals, and pythons to crush pigs? Only a fiend would invent all these vicious things.

In the fourth century BCE, the Greek skeptic Epicurus was the first known thinker to spell out this dilemma. In his Aphorisms, he wrote: "Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to.... If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked.... If, as they say, God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?"

In 24 centuries since, no clergyman has been able to refute this ironclad logic. Instead, divines usually duck the question by declaring "we can't know God's will" - although they claim to know his will on all other matters. (God's will usually matches the prejudices of the holy man proclaiming it.)

Primitive-minded people often think disasters are God's punishment for human sin. Some tribes sacrificed maidens to appease rumbling volcanos. The historic Lisbon earthquake of 1755 likewise killed more than 100,000 people - and

afterward, priests roamed the shattered streets, hanging people they suspected of incurring God's wrath.

Immediately after the Indian Ocean tragedy, Israel's chief Sephardi rabbi, Shlomo Amar, told Reuters: "This is an expression of God's great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrongdoing." The international news syndicate also quoted a Hindu high priest as saying the tsunami was caused by "a huge amount of pent-up manmade evil on Earth," combined with positions of the planets. And it quoted a Jehovah's Witness as saying the tragedy is "a sign of the last days," fulfilling Christ's promise that devastation will precede the time when believers will "see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Catholic Bishop Alex Dias of Port Blair, India, said the tsunami was "a warning from God to reflect deeply on the way we lead our lives." On MSNBC's Scarborough Country, Jennifer Giroux, director of Women Influencing the Nation (WIN), said the tsunami was divine punishment for America's "cloning, homosexuality, trying to make homosexual marriages, abortion, lack of God in the schools, taking Jesus out of Christmas." She added ominously that God "will not be mocked."

What a bunch of imbeciles. Especially the latter: Why would a loving creator drown south Asians in a rage over American sins?

More sophisticated divines danced around the glaring quandary raised by the tsunami. The Archbishop of Canterbury wrote in the London Sunday Telegraph: "The question - how can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale? - is very much around at the moment." Without answering the question, he noted that "belief has survived such tests again and again" - and he said the tragedies actually spur more faith.

(The archbishop may be right that this "act of god" probably will result in more irrational worship. After the horrible 1906 earthquake, the region around San Francisco experienced a surge in evangelism and growth of the Pentecostal talking-in-tongues movement. After the 9/11 "martyrs" killed 3,000 Americans as a supposed service to God, millions of other Americans rushed to church to pray to the same God.)

Meanwhile, the tsunami caused some writers to speak boldly in places where religion wields less power. Columnist Kenneth Nguyen of The Age in Melbourne, Australia, wrote: "For agnostics, including me, the tsunami has highlighted just how unpalatable the idea of an interventionist God ultimately is.... The random destruction wreaked upon our Earth by one tectonic shift fits uneasily with prevailing visions of an all-powerful, philosophically benevolent God. Sunday's tsunami broke countless lives, hearts, communities. It would be little wonder if it ended up breaking many people's faith too."

And at Cape Town, South Africa, John Scarp wrote in the Cape Argus: "Natural disasters like this reveal the ultimate weakness of nearly all religions.... The desperate attempts of religion to justify them as part of God's plan simply reveal the delusional nature of religious belief."

Shakespeare's King Lear lamented: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport." But Shakespeare was speaking metaphorically. Privately, he had no use for gods (but he couldn't say so openly, in his era of blasphemy trials).

Throughout history, some intelligent observers have realized that disasters are purely natural, not guided by spirits. Regarding a plague that killed a third of the people of Athens in 430 BCE, Thucydides wrote that prayers and oracles had no effect on the disease, and Athenians who worshipped gods fervently died as readily as sinners did. After an earthquake, forerunner to the eruption of Vesuvius, hit Pompeii in the first century CE, Seneca wrote: "Keep in mind that gods cause none of these things.... These phenomena have causes of their own; they do not rage on command."

In the wake of the horrible Indian Ocean tsunami, thoughtful people everywhere may see the absurdity of worshiping a supposedly loving god who, if he existed, would reign over the drowning of children.

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